

The Disadvantage in Subjective Well-Being among Self-Defined Ethnic Minorities: A Multilevel Analysis of European Countries

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***** Extended Abstract *****

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Abstract

In this study we try to explain the difference in subjective well-being between citizens who self-identify as a member of an ethnic minority group and citizens who describe themselves as a member of the majority population. We use data from twenty countries that are represented in the fifth edition of the European Social Survey, with more than 1,500 ethnic minority respondents and 36,000 respondents in total. Though initially majority-minority differences in both life satisfaction and happiness can be observed, with ethnic minority respondents having lower levels, these differences can be fully explained by the fact that ethnic minority respondents occupy relatively disadvantaged socio-economic positions and experience more discrimination in society, and this finding is in line with the need-gratification theory of subjective well-being.

Introduction

Social inequality is one of the classic problems studied in sociology (Lenski, 1966). The research on social inequality and stratification has broadened from a focus on class divisions in society to a focus including the dividing lines of race and ethnicity, which often intersect with class divisions (Anthias, 2001). Consequently, many studies have provided evidence for the disadvantaged position of ethnic minorities in societies, mainly focusing on economic indicators such as employment and income (De Jong & Madamba, 2001; Rooth & Ekberg, 2003; Van Tubergen, 2006).

More recently, psychologists have argued that measures of subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction and happiness, can be important additional indicators of inequality in society (Diener, 2000; Veenhoven, 2004). Measures of subjective well-being can be an important addition to traditional economic indicators of inequality, because they more closely reflect what people themselves find important in life (Veenhoven, 2004). When research can show

evidence for determinants of subjective well-being, then policies could be developed that improve quality of life from the perspectives of citizens themselves.

Research has shown that subjective well-being encompasses distinct components, with the clearest distinction being made between life satisfaction, on the one hand, and happiness on the other (Angner, 2010). Life satisfaction is the more cognitive component of subjective well-being, and can be defined as people's evaluations and judgments about their quality of life as a whole, while happiness is the more experiential component, which can be defined as people's feelings about whether they are generally in a positive mood (Angner, 2010; Diener, 2000). In this study, we focus on both of these important aspects of subjective well-being. We investigate the differences in subjective well-being between ethnic minorities and majority members in European societies.

Previous research on immigrant populations strongly suggests that levels of subjective well-being are lower among ethnic minorities than among majority group members. A cross-national study among first and second generation immigrants in thirteen European countries showed that life satisfaction and happiness were lower among these groups, compared to natives (Safi, 2010). Several national studies on immigrant populations showed similar results, across different destination countries in Western Europe and different immigrant origin countries, such as from Eastern Europe, Asian and African countries (Bălătescu 2007; De Vroome & Hooghe, 2013; Verkuyten 2008).

Importantly, however, these previous studies in Europe have focused on minorities with an immigrant background, rather than on ethnic minorities. The distinction is crucial, because ethnic minorities can also include indigenous minorities. Moreover, the terms 'immigrant' and 'second generation immigrant' are becoming increasingly contested when it comes to the descendants of immigrants, because the terms itself can have a stigmatizing effect, on the one hand, and because individuals whose families have settled in a country more than two generations ago can still consider themselves as members of an ethnic minority group, on the other (Ahmed, Feliciano & Emigh, 2007; Thomassen, 2010). In this study, therefore, we focus on self-defined ethnic minority status, whether this status is related to immigration history or experience or not.

The aim of this study is to explain the gap in subjective well-being between those citizens who define themselves as a member of an ethnic minority group and those who define themselves as a member of the majority population. To explain this gap, we use the need-

gratification theory, which is based on Maslow's theory of human motivation (Oishi, Diener, Lucas and Suh, 1999). From this perspective, we make the connection between the economically disadvantaged position and experiences of discrimination among minority group members, on the one hand, and their lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness, on the other. We investigate both whether economic position and perceived discrimination can explain the gap in subjective well-being between majority and minority members, and to what extent economic position and discrimination have a similar effect on subjective well-being among these groups.

To answer our research questions, we use the fifth edition of the European Social Survey (ESS), which was administered over the course of 2010 and 2011. These data allow us to conduct a multilevel analysis of subjective well-being among majority and minority members across 20 European countries.

Economic position, discrimination and need-gratification

Need-gratification theory is especially well-equipped to study the differences in subjective well-being that can be observed between members of the native majority and those who define themselves as ethnic minorities. The need-gratification approach argues that subjective well-being is based on the extent to which universal human needs are fulfilled. These needs include basic physiological needs such as food and water, the needs for a sense of safety, love and belonging, esteem and positive regard, and the desire for personal growth (Maslow 1970; Oishi et al. 1999; Veenhoven 1991).

Many studies have shown that, on average, minority groups in Western societies are facing disadvantaged socio-economic positions (Nazroo, 2003; Van Tubergen 2006). Moreover, these socio-economic disadvantages have been convincingly shown to be associated with inequalities in health, which can also be considered an important component of quality of life (Cooper, 2002; Nazroo, 2003). These medical studies further suggest that socio-economic disadvantage can frustrate the gratification of physiological needs. Moreover, economic position can be related to the needs for esteem and personal growth, as professional activities are a clear source of respect and an outlet for creativity. The perception of discrimination, on the other hand, can be negatively related to the need for esteem and a sense of belonging, and can furthermore threaten individuals' sense of safety. Because members of ethnic minority

groups have often been found to hold disadvantaged socio-economic positions in Western societies, and because minority group members are likely to perceive higher levels of discrimination than majority members, we focus on these two factors to explain majority-minority differences in subjective well-being.

(...)

H1. The differences in subjective well-being between majority group members and ethnic minorities can be explained by differences in economic position.

(...)

H2. The differences in subjective well-being between majority group members and ethnic minorities can be explained by differences in experienced discrimination.

Do economic position and discrimination equally affect majority members?

Our main argument is that economic position and perceived discrimination can have a mediating role, meaning that they can possibly explain differences between minority and majority group members in subjective well-being. However, we also want to explore the extent to which economic position and discrimination have a different impact on subjective well-being among majority group members than they have among members of minority populations, in other words the interaction effects.

(...)

H3. The effects of economic position and experienced discrimination on subjective well-being will be stronger among ethnic minorities than among majority group members.

Data and Methods

Our analysis is based on the fifth edition of the European Social Survey, with supplemental country level data, which is necessary for our multilevel approach. The data applied here is based on the ESS Multilevel Data Repository. The individual level data is taken from the

surveys that have been administered over the course of 2010 and 2011, in 27 European countries in total. The country level data is provided by Eurostat and the OECD, and prepared and made publicly available by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

Because country level living conditions are important to take into account from the perspective of need gratification theory, only the twenty countries for which the additional macro data was available from Eurostat and the OECD were included in the analysis presented here. These countries are Belgium, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia and Slovakia. We have deleted cases with missing values listwise, with two exceptions discussed below. All in all, our analyses are therefore based on a sample that includes 36,969 respondents.

(...)

Results

(...)

Discussion

Our study confirms the expectation that subjective well-being, in terms of life satisfaction and happiness, is lower among people who self-identify as a member of an ethnic minority group compared to those who consider themselves to be part of the majority population. The most important conclusion, however, is that these differences can be fully explained by the fact that ethnic minority members occupy more disadvantaged socio-economic positions in European societies and experience more discrimination. This is an important addition to previous studies among immigrant populations in Europe, which have concluded that levels of life satisfaction among immigrants are lower than among the majority population and which have suggested explanations for these differences (De Vroome & Hooghe, 2013; Safi, 2010). Where these previous studies emphasized the disadvantage in life satisfaction of minorities that are externally classified as first or second generation immigrant, our study adds that the qualitatively different group of people who self-identify as a member of an ethnic minority group are faced with a similar disadvantage.

(...)

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